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ABSTRACT

The history of experiential learning in American higher education is outlined, and the rationale and learning objectives of this type of experience are addressed. Experiential education has resulted from an emphasis on practical knowledge. Although the colonial colleges focused on the classical curriculum, the scientific method of the natural sciences brought concern for practical education and experiential learning, and the Morrill Act in 1862 provided public support of a practical orientation of higher education. Other developments with implications for experiential learning include progressivism, the rise of professions, and the tendency toward multi-disciplinary and cross-disciplinary curricula. Curricula in the academic disciplines, especially in the liberal arts, are increasingly including experiential learning. Quality education requires the kinds of learning involved in both experiential education and information assimilation. The strengths and weakness of experiential learning and information assimilation are addressed. Nine objectives of experiential learning are identified, including: applying or evaluating the body of knowledge and method of inquiry of a discipline through first-hand participation; acquiring skills and values specific to a profession; and learning in a self-directed manner. (SW)

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Panel Resource Paper #1

HISTORY AND RATIONALE FOR EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING

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PANEL Resource Paper #1

HISTORY AND RATIONALE FOR EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING

by Thomas C. Little

Tom Little administers the Virginia Internship Program, which involves 1,000 students and 40 colleges each year. He also directs the FIPSE-funded National Training Project in Experiential Learning and serves on three commissions concerned with national policies for the education-to-work transitions of college students.

History and rationale statements in support of experiential learning reflect two realities in higher education. The emphasis on history is a reminder that higher education is inherently conservative, with precedent being the basic operational principle. The emphasis on rationale is a reminder of the importance of reason as a guide for what is done. Since higher education is a societal institution concerned with education, reason as to what provides quality should direct its practice. Accordingly, this paper outlines the history of experiential learning in American higher education and explains why experiential learning provides quality to education. Finally, some common objectives of experiential learning programs formed in the crucible of curriculum and society and reflective of the unique potential of experiential learning are listed.

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EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING IN AMERICAN HIGHER EDUCATION: A HISTORY

Practicality is the unique hallmark of American higher education. Unlike the history of higher education in other countries, American higher education evolved through the practical needs of culture and society. Experiential learning programs resulted from this emphasis on the practical. They emerged and continue to grow, concurrent with the increasingly greater concern for practical knowledge in American higher education across three centuries.

From our earliest history, the emphasis was on practical knowledge. The 1701 Connecticut Act that led to the founding of Yale University called for a school "wherein youth might be instructed in the Arts and Sciences who through the blessing of Almighty God may be fitted for Publick employment both in Church and the Civil State." At that time, the classical curriculum inherited from the English colleges with instruction in logic, grammar, rhetoric, arithmetic, geometry, astronomy, and music provided a practical training for clergy and statesmen -- those who would supply the difference between civilization and barbarism.

The colonial colleges, however, forgot their practical orientation. They continued the classical curriculum, seemingly unaware of the changing needs of an emerging nation. In traditionalism, they lost their societal importance. They became separate from culture and society with predictable results -- the nation's youth left the colleges for learning through direct experience. In the years before the Civil War, for example, over 700 colleges ceased to exist. By 1847, New York City, the vibrant center of the nation's development, with a population of 500,000, had only two colleges enrolling a total of only 247 students.

There were numerous critics of the lack of practical and experiential elements in the educational establishment. Henry David Thoreau, Harvard Class of 1837, looked back on his college days with serious disillusionment. Passages from Walden spoke for fellow graduates and other critics:

> Students should not play life, or study it merely, while the community supports them at this expensive game, but earnestly live it from beginning to end. How could youth better learn to live than by at once trying the experiment of living? Me thinks this would exercise their minds as much as mathematics.

> Which would have advanced the most at the end of the month -- the boy who had made his own jackknife from the ore which he had dug and smelted, reading as much as would be necessary for this -- or the boy who had attended the lecture on metallurgy at the institute in the meanwhile, and had received a penknife from his father? Which would be most likely to cut his fingers?[1]

The natural sciences provided a beachhead for a return to practical education and experiential learning. This was inevitable, for scientific method is inherently experiential. Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute, founded in 1824, was the pioneer institution. Instruction of students at Rensselaer began with the practical application of the subject at hand; they were introduced to the scientific principles involved as progress in their studies required. For example, a visit to a bleaching factory or tannery always preceded the appropriate laboratory experiment. Students traveled from New York to Lake Erie on steamboats to study botany and visited the Pennsylvania coal fields to study geology. The Institute thus provided the first systematic field work in American higher education. Developments at Rensselaer mirrored developments nationally as science became experiential instead of descriptive. In a symbolic gesture, Professor Herman C. Bumpus, Professor of Zoology at Brown, literally threw aside "the stuffed walrus and the stuffed giraffe of the old natural history tradition . . . and set the students down at the dissecting table."[2]

The passage of the Morrill Act in 1862 was a national, political statement confirming that American higher education would have a practical orientation. The Act provided "support in every state of at least one college where the leading objective shall be to teach such branches of learning as are related to agricultural and mechanical arts." Field work, in a very literal sense, was part of the curriculum. The archives of land grant institutions are filled with reports and photographs of students in farming, dairying, and building construction. One president of a land grant college described the relationship of classroom and experiential instruction with:

> The student of pomology goes into the orchard and vineyard; the student in stock breeding has the care of stock; the botanist works in the garden, and the mechanic in the workshop.[3]

The next major movement in the nation's history with implications for experiential learning was progressivism. This movement projected the belief that critical thought, good will, and service would provide a more just social order. Higher education, as the locus of knowledge and expertise, was the locomotive for this reform movement. Professors and students became agents of change in a number of settings, from city halls to meat-packing plants.

A most common setting was the university settlement home. Jane Addams' Hull House in Chicago, for example, was created by the University of Michigan, Northwestern University, and the University of Chicago. The creed of Hull House epitomizes the faith of progressivism:

> We believe in self-sacrifice for the good of all people . . . We want to be good citizens . . . We want to make Chicago a place where government may be pure, her officers honest, and every corner of her territory a place fit to grow the best men and women, who shall rule over her.[4]

In New York, Vasser, Smith, and Wellesley operated a college settlement at 95 Rivington Street, where women organized the Penny Provident Fund to encourage banking and founded other community groups. The motivation of these students in the 1890's was the same as students today in some experiential programs.

The next phenomena in American higher education calling for a mix of theory and practice was the rise of professions, beginning at the turn of the century. Theory and practice elements took different directions for different professions. In the classical professions of divinity, law, and medicine, the direction was to add practical elements to what had been essentially classroom-based instruction. Schools of law added moot court exercises and law clinics. The Johns Hopkins University revolutionized medical education by requiring direct work experience in hospital wards and the community -- i.e., the medical internship.

For other professions, the movement was from practice to theory. These emerging professions included teaching, mechanical engineering, pharmacy, nursing, journalism, architecture, and business. These occupations were formerly crafts in which skills were learned on the job or in the field. In a concern for better performance, instruction in theory

was added to complement practical knowledge. These professions remained true to their heritage. Practicums were part of the instruction, serving as the capstone of the curriculum and usually as a condition for a professional license.

A newer and still prevalent trend related to professional education with significant implications for experiential learning is the powerful tendency toward multi-disciplinary and cross-disciplinary curriculums. The root of this phenomena is the exponential explosion of knowledge compounded by a strong cultural desire for knowledge to have societal utility. With the advancement of the academic disciplines, sub-disciplines emerge and form with other sub-disciplines to address a social concern. The permutations are incalculable. Sub-disciplines in economics, geography, sociology and architecture formed a curriculum in urban and regional planning. Public administration developed from sub-disciplines in political science and business and then further combined with recreation, a sub-discipline, of physical education, to form recreation administration. These new curricula usually include a practical experience for the exercise and interpretation of the sub-disciplines. This practical experience, typically called an internship, plays a significant role in the new curriculum, often requiring a full-time commitment for at least a semester.

In something of a response to this specialization, curricula in the academic disciplines, especially in the liberal arts, are increasingly including experiential learning. The assumption of this effort is that students will realize the benefits of academic studies while not being penalized when seeking employment in the work force. Studies by the College Placement Council provide persuasive evidence for this assumption. Examples abound for this substitution of work experience for occupationally technical instruction. Sociology curricula include field experiences to compete with social work; literature curricula include internships in writing to compete with journalism and communications.

Questioning of the education-work linkage in academic disciplines has prompted a new consideration of the liberal arts curriculum. Effective liberal learning is recognized as more than simply content knowledge structured by academic disciplines. There is a concern for affective abilities. At a number of institutions, domains of affective skills have

been defined. A typical organization of such domains is by George Klemp, who outlines six generic skills desirable for effective performance in work and in other life activities as well:

1. conceptualization competence,
2. diagnostic use of concepts,
3. acting efficiently in task accomplishment,
4. acting pro-actively,
5. competence in the use of socialized power, and
6. competence in exemplifying positive regard for others.[5]

Experiential learning programs are recognized as critical in developing these competencies. The instructional curriculum can remain traditional if students are provided work and service opportunities for honing these affective, liberal skills. For institutions that have changed their curricula toward affective outcomes, work and service experiences are formally integrated into the curriculum.

Two important forms of experiential learning emerged in the 1960's and continue still -- cross-cultural learning and service-learning. The sixties saw the development of electronic communications, particularly television, and rapid social and political change. Our view of the world expanded as we learned of other places, cultures, conditions, and economic and social systems -- across town and around the world. The world shrank to a global village as a new level of understanding that "no man is an island" emerged.

In experiential learning, the result was cross-cultural programs. These were much more than student travel or the traditional "Grand Tour of European Capitols." Students became participants as well as observers. Work or service experiences provided windows of understanding through which emersion into a culture was possible. White students spent a year in black communities; economically advantaged students learned from a semester in Appalachian hollows. Many students and supporting faculty were not content with what they saw. The challenge was to change and improve. Service-learning programs involved students in community service activities as a basis for learning, not only about the community, but about their capabilities as agents for change. Other students took a more aggressive stance toward change. They confronted political, social, and

economic systems. Blacks in ghettos were registered to vote; miners in Appalachia were organized for better health care. It was the spirit of Progressivism rekindled, but with more depth and less innocence. The service-learning movement of today, while less activist in style, continues as a very strong force for a balancing of learning and service. Commitment to addressing human needs is one of its primary outcome goals.

Looking back at our history during the past decade and the three centuries preceding it, the lesson is unmistakable. We are a people who value knowledge, but not knowledge without a purpose. Our belief is in the power of knowledge -- knowing to do. Understandably, experiential learning -- the practice in the use of that power -- has a long and deep tradition in institutions responsible for higher education.

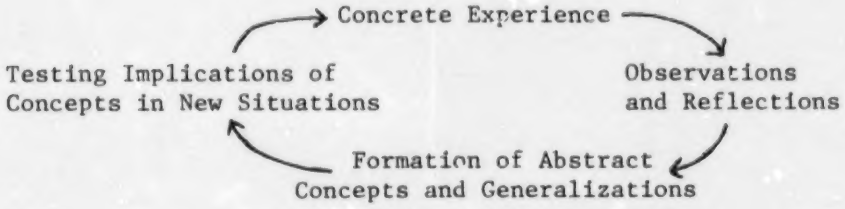
EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING FOR COMPLETE LEARNING: A RATIONALE

The rationale for experiential learning is that quality education requires both kinds of learning -- experiential learning and information assimilation -- because their strengths and weaknesses are mutually complementary. The strengths of experiential learning compensate for the weaknesses of information assimilation, and vice versa.

Information assimilation has been a dominant pattern of learning in American higher education. The medium is symbols, either words or numbers. Techniques include lectures and seminar discussions. Learning sites are classrooms and libraries. Experiential learning is quite different. The medium is direct experience, not a symbolic representation of reality. Its techniques include work or service activities. Learning sites range from ghetto playgrounds to corporate headquarters.

The differences in media, techniques and settings are obvious when comparing the elements and sequence of elements in the two kinds of learning. David Kolb has postulated a widely accepted cycle of experiential learning:

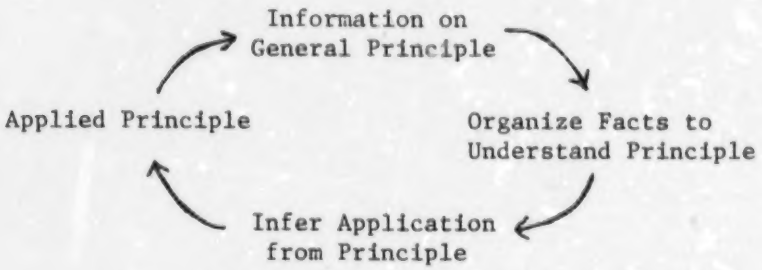
EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING MODEL


Concrete Experience
Observations and Reflections
Formation of Abstract Concepts and Generalizations
Testing Implications of Concepts in New Situations

The first component is concrete action in a specific situation and noting the effects of that action. The second component is reflective observation on that action to identify the particulars of the situation. The third is generalization about the relationship of the elements to the results of the action. If one is struck by lightning while standing under a tall tree in an open field, the generalization might be that the tall tree provided a path for the electrical discharge. The fourth component is systematic testing of the generalization for relationships with different conditions. For example, can lightning rods above a house provide protection for that house in an electrical storm?

The information assimilation mode has the same elements but in a reverse sequence:

INFORMATION ASSIMILATION MODEL



As a first step, symbolic information is provided about what is considered a general principle. The next step is to process bits of information (facts) so that the general principle is understood. For example, if the general principle is that solids, liquids, and gases are the forms of matter with the operational condition being the relative concentration of molecules, understanding is enhanced by the information that ice, water and steam are all forms of the same compound. The third step is to infer an application from the general principle. For example, heat will expand the distance between molecules and thus transform water into steam. The final component is to apply the principle concretely -- to see whether what is supposed to happen actually happens.

The complementary nature of information assimilation and experiential learning is obvious when their respective strengths and weaknesses are compared. One favorable attribute of information assimilation is its efficiency. Information can be acquired very quickly when using a symbolic medium to express the inferences others have made over many centuries. One limitation of information assimilation, however, is this dependence on a symbolic medium. The limitation has two roots. First, a student must know and understand the symbols. In higher education, with each academic discipline having a unique language and paradigms, this is no easy task. Secondly, a medium dependent on symbols is subject to all inherent problems of symbolic communication. Single words have plural meanings; each word also has a set of associations, and the associations held by individuals can differ radically. For example, in-

carceration for one person communicates protection for society; for another, it communicates control by one group of those with different but nevertheless real values.

The other limitations of information assimilation arise in the third and fourth steps of the learning cycle. Students describe these limitations in reporting that they know something but do not understand its applicability or how to apply it. Employers express it in their primary criticism of college graduates that students know a lot but cannot do anything -- obviously a case of incomplete learning.

The problem of application points to a final limitation of information assimilation, the lack of intrinsic and primary forces of motivation. This limitation is grounded in the quality that distinguishes humans from other life forms. This quality is agency -- acting consciously within at least a limited set of options. In information assimilation, action comes last in the learning cycle and provides no intrinsic motivating force. Colleges and universities understand this limitation, and they provide the extrinsic and often artificial motivating forces of required courses and status-based, differential grading.

The strengths and weaknesses of experiential learning form a desirable complement to those just presented for information assimilation. Experiential learning is inefficient. A direct experience with reality has inherent limitations in the predictability and quantity of learning. The primary attribute of experiential learning is the effectiveness of the learning. The learner knows quite well the meaning and practical value of what is learned. In the simplest example, the learner may not know the principle that materials have differential capacities to conduct electricity, but he knows quite concretely the results of holding an electrically charged copper wire.

This example emphasizes the final positive characteristic of experiential learning -- its power to provide primary and intrinsic motivation for learning. Action is the first element in experiential learning, and it motivates the completion of the total learning cycle. Direct experience of reality inherently prompts a decision to act to control the environment. A student employed as counselor in a camp for physically handicapped youth may not understand the physiology of the handicap, but being in a situation of agency prompts a decision to act to remove or

counter the limitations of the handicap. From this motivating force, the student will pursue general concepts to enhance his effectiveness as an agent.

To realize the complementary nature of experiential learning and information assimilation is to suggest the obvious. The question is the right mix, relative to what is to be learned. Effective knowledge of philosophy may require more experiential learning than literature and sociology more than philosophy. Some knowledge may be best acquired primarily experientially. The question is not whether theory or practice provides quality, but rather what combination of the two provides complete learning.

LEARNING OBJECTIVES IN EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING: AN ALTERNATIVE TO "PROGRAM TYPES"

A useful maxim of philosophy is that a difference that makes no difference is not a difference. This old adage is particularly helpful when considering a typology for forms of experiential learning. Forms do have particular names (internship, cooperative education, service-learning, work-learning, practicum, field work, field study), but any effort to distinguish one from another requires so many exceptions that the typology quickly breaks down. Historically, some particular forms have had unique characteristics; but, across time, they have all become broader and incorporated the desirable features from other forms. At present, "experiential learning" is gaining general acceptance as the generic name, and practitioners name their own programs according to what is emphasized or preferable in the local context.

Regardless of what experiential learning programs are called, they are built on a common pool of objectives. A particular program can address several or all of these objectives. Accordingly, experiential learning can provide students an opportunity to:

1. apply, integrate, and evaluate the body of knowledge and the method of inquiry of a discipline or field via first-hand participation;
2. acquire skills and values specific to a profession, occupation, social institution, or organization; e.g., accounting, law, hospitals;
3. acquire and develop general functional skills and attitudes necessary for effective adult life; e.g., interpersonal interaction, group process, intercultural communication, coping with ambiguity, and working on real problems with other adults;
4. develop the ability to learn in a self-directed fashion. This is encouraged by the opportunity to see real consequences of one's actions and to succeed or fail on criteria other than grades;
5. develop and use an ethical perspective or stance; to develop moral reasoning or judgment in ethically complex situations;
6. test careers by exploration or confirmation of career choices and to gain documented work experience;

7. become responsible citizens of the community by identifying issues of social concern and developing skills for citizen participation;

8. have access to knowledge not easily attained through classroom instruction; e.g., oral history of a population, exercise of political power;

9. identify problems for further study.[6]

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[1]Henry Thoreau, Walden: Or Life in the Woods (Boston, 1854), pp. 56-57.

[2]Frederick Rudolph, The American College and University (New York, Random House, 1962), p. 247.

[3]Morris T. Keeton and Associates, Experiential Learning: Rationale, Characteristics, and Assessment (San Francisco, Jossey-Bass, 1976), p. 28.

[4]Rudolph, p. 368.

[5]George Klemp, unpublished manuscript.

[6]Thomas R. Haugsby, "Reflections on a Typology for Experiential Learning," Experiential Education (May-June, 1980), Vol. 5, No. 3, p. 3.

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